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(517) 373-7394

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**Tuesday, October 21, 2008**

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October 21, 2008

## Lawmakers to Amend 'Haven' Law in Nebraska

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

Shocked by the recent abandonment of 19 children to state custody, including several teenagers and two children from other states, [Nebraska](#) officials said Monday that the state's "safe haven" law would soon be altered to apply only to newborns.

"This law has had serious, unintended consequences," Gov. Dave Heineman said at a news conference in Lincoln. He was flanked by state senators who said a large majority of their peers were ready to rewrite the law when the Legislature convened in January, or sooner if necessary.

In July, Nebraska became the last of the 50 states to enact a safe-haven law. Intended to prevent so-called Dumpster babies, newborns abandoned to possible death by desperate young mothers, the laws in all other states specify that people may drop off infants, up to a certain age, without prosecution.

But Nebraska's version offered this protection to any "child" left at a hospital, meaning through age 18. Since Sept. 1, several guardians of older children they described as violent and out of control were abandoned under the law. In one highly publicized case, a single father dropped off nine children, saying that his wife had died and he could not cope with raising them. In the past two weeks, grandparents from Iowa and a mother from Detroit traveled to Omaha to leave unruly children.

"The original intent was to focus on infants," Mr. Heineman said in an interview. "In discussion in the Legislature, they changed the word to 'child,' but nobody thought that would happen."

The nine children who were dropped off by their father have been placed with relatives, the Iowa child was returned to her home and the Detroit child was placed in the custody of Michigan's child welfare agency. The other Nebraska children are in the care of the State Department of Health and Human Services.

State Senator Mike Flood, the speaker of the unicameral Legislature, said at the news conference that at least 40 of the 49 senators had agreed to change the law, applying its protection only to newborns up to three days old.

The spate of abandonments prompted questions, in Nebraska and around the country, about the adequacy of mental health, respite care and other services for teenagers and overstressed families with modest incomes.

Mr. Heineman, a Republican, said the state would spend more to publicize hot lines that offer referrals to aid agencies and would start a public awareness campaign about available assistance.

About half of the abandoned children, officials said, were former wards of the state who were adopted or under the guardianship of relatives, often grandmothers or aunts, who said the disruptive children had sent them to the end of their ropes. As a result, the director of Nebraska's Division of Children and Family Services, Todd Landry, is sending a letter to adoptive parents and guardians of former wards "to ensure that they are aware of the services available to them," Mr. Heineman said.

State Senator Arnie Stuthman, sponsor of the Nebraska bill, said in an interview that beyond publicizing existing aid, officials would also try to make sure that promised social services were readily available to older children. "We want to make sure guardians don't get the runaround when they seek help," Mr. Stuthman said.

Mr. Heineman said he and the Legislature would review "whether we are offering the services we need."

Legislators have pledged to revise the law immediately after they convene for a regular session in January. If several more children are dropped off in coming weeks, Mr. Heineman said, he may be forced to call a special session to act sooner. "I'd prefer not to do that, given how close we are to January," he said.

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October 21, 2008

## Nebraska to change law that allows kids to be abandoned

*ASSOCIATED PRESS*

LINCOLN, Neb. -- Stung by the abandonment of children as old as 17 at Nebraska hospitals, the governor and lawmakers struck a deal Monday to rewrite the state's safe haven law so it applies to only infants up to 3 days old.

A rash of drop-offs in recent months, including that of a 13-year-old Southfield boy, thrust Nebraska into the national spotlight. Forty of the 49 senators in the unicameral Legislature and Gov. Dave Heineman have agreed to the changes, Speaker of the Legislature Mike Flood said Monday.

The state's safe haven law allows caregivers to abandon children -- interpreted by some to include those as old as 18 -- at hospitals without fear of prosecution. The age cap would change Nebraska's safe haven law from the most lenient in the nation to one of the most restrictive. Sixteen other states have a 3-day-old age cap.

At least 18 children, ages 22 months to 17 years, have been abandoned since the law took effect in July. The law, intended to prevent infants from being dumped or abandoned in dangerous places by mothers who don't want them, has had "serious, unintended consequences," Heineman said.

Heineman has said he would prefer not to call a special session to change the law before the regular session starts in January, though he indicated that if more out-of-state children were abandoned under the law, he might change his mind. Flood said lawmakers would likely change the law quickly in the first couple of weeks of the new year.

The proposed changes stem in part from the Oct. 13 abandonment of the Southfield boy, who told Nebraska police his mother, Teri Martin, was stressed out and unable to handle his behavior. Martin drove the boy 12 hours to abandon him under the Nebraska safe haven law, after reportedly learning about it from family in a nearby state.

On Friday, an Oakland County family court referee stripped Martin and her husband, Terrence Martin, of custody of their three other children. Two are their biological children; the other is the 13-year-old's younger brother, who was adopted with his brother out of foster care.

The 13-year-old is expected to return to Michigan this week.

Court documents describe alleged abuse against the 13-year-old. Court documents also show that the Department of Human Services recommended mental health services for the boy, who is supposedly on behavior-modifying medicine, but there is little evidence the Martins complied.

Through her attorney, Alan Byrd, Teri Martin said there is another side of the story, which will likely come out during the Nov. 7 pretrial hearing that could strip the Martins of their parental rights to the 13-year-old.

*Free Press staff writer Megha Satyanarayana contributed to this report.*



Tuesday, October 21, 2008

## Plymouth Township

# Dead newborn's mom charged

**Woman faces 3 murder counts; police say she went to hospital with hemorrhage, initially denied giving birth.**

**Steve Pardo / The Detroit News**

**PLYMOUTH TOWNSHIP** -- A 28-year-old woman was charged with three counts of murder Monday after her newborn baby was found dead last week in her Plymouth Township home.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy charged Emily Portellos with felony murder, premeditated first-degree murder and second-degree murder. She was also charged with first-degree child abuse.

Plymouth Township Det. Sgt. Steven Rapson said a local hospital notified police around 8 p.m. Wednesday they had a patient in their emergency room with severe hemorrhaging. The doctors determined the woman had recently given birth, Rapson said, and were trying to find the baby.

"The patient initially denied giving birth," he said. "But through an interview with the officers ... she told us where the baby was." The baby was found lifeless -- wrapped in towels and in a plastic bag -- in the woman's bedroom at the house on Deer Creek Run, Rapson said.

Neighbors on Monday said they were shocked when they saw ambulances and police cars at the home Wednesday.

The Deer Creek subdivision off Powell is normally quiet -- a place where people keep to themselves. The area consists of landscaped lawns and many of the homes are valued at more than \$500,000. Monday afternoon it was quiet.

The loudest sounds came from the occasional conversations of laborers working on a home. With the exception of media vehicles, few cars drove on the street.

Portellos, too, was something of a mystery on Monday afternoon. Several neighbors said they remembered or knew the deceased patriarch of the home but didn't know her. Some hadn't seen her around in the neighborhood at all.

They wondered why a woman wouldn't put a baby up for adoption or at least deliver her to a police station, a hospital or a fire station under Michigan's safe-haven law, which allows a parent to leave a child anonymously.

Portellos remains in St. Mary's Hospital in Livonia. Her arraignment is likely today in 35th District Court.

If she's unable to attend, she will be arraigned from her hospital bed, Rapson said.

*You can reach Steve Pardo at (734) 462-2191 or [spardo@detnews.com](mailto:spardo@detnews.com).*

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## **COURT DOCKET: Man gets jail time for abusing son**

A Sterling Heights man was sentenced Monday to 30 days in the Livingston County Jail for abusing his toddler son.

District Judge L. Suzanne Geddis also ordered Mark David Rodgers to serve 18 months of probation and undergo counseling for child abuse.

Michigan State Police alleged Rodgers, 25, struck his 2-year-old son in the back of the head hard enough that the boy's head hit a patch of concrete. The incident occurred in Livingston County.

Rodgers was charged with third-degree child abuse, a two-year misdemeanor, but he pleaded guilty to fourth-degree child abuse, which is punishable by up to one year in the county jail.

He also pleaded guilty to driving with a suspended license.



Tuesday, October 21, 2008

**Decision 2008: Stem cell debate**

# Embryo adoption grows as option

## Feds promote it as family alternative

**Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News**

**FALMOUTH** -- At a routine ultrasound eight months into Rachelle Rife's first pregnancy, a technician turned the monitor to her and her husband, Troy.

"Here's an ear," the technician said, pointing to the developing baby. "Whose is it?"

The Rifés looked at each other and laughed.

"Neither one," said Rachelle, who later gave birth to Greyson Kent, who has no genetic relation to her or Troy.

Greyson was one of seven frozen embryos left over from another couple's in-vitro fertilization treatments. The couple allowed the Rifés, of Falmouth, east of Cadillac in northern Michigan, to adopt them.

"This is God's promise to us," said Troy. "This is our baby boy."

One of an estimated 314 "snowflake" babies in the United States, Greyson represents one of two divergent, but equally hope-filled possibilities for frozen embryos -- human life or medical breakthroughs through human embryonic stem cell research.

The federal government is promoting embryo donation as a family-building option, while some opponents of human embryonic stem cell research have embraced it as an alternative use for excess embryos.

Scientists in Michigan are barred from destroying embryos for research, which is the only way to create stem cell lines, but a state ballot proposal will give voters a chance to reverse that Nov. 4.

Scientists argue that unfettered access to embryonic stem cells, which are typically derived from 5- to 6-day-old frozen embryos, could do for health care what the Internet has done for global communication because they have the ability to transform into any type of cell scientists want to study. Because they can be turned into any type of cell, researchers hope to pinpoint genetic triggers for diseases such as cancer and diabetes and study potential treatments. Adult stem cells, by contrast, are found in a limited number of tissues and organs and can generally only replicate the type of cells from which they were derived.

Though the coalition opposing the ballot initiative has focused primarily on the ballot language, saying it goes too far, other opponents object to the research because of the potential life these embryos can create.



Advocates, however, say a few people choose this option and the miracle of life and embryonic stem cell research can co-exist.

"One does not in any way negate the other," said Marcia Baum, executive director of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures. "There's enough (frozen embryos) for both."

For the Rifes, adopting the embryo that became Greyson had nothing to do with politics. It simply provided an opportunity they never thought they would have: giving birth and having genetic siblings available for more children.

"This," Rachelle said, "is the biggest miracle of our life."

### **'So out of the ordinary'**

The Rifes learned about embryo adoption at a seminar put on by Bethany Christian Services, a Grand Rapids-based national adoption agency and a leader in embryo adoption. Troy, 42, was intrigued, but Rachelle, 29, needed to be convinced.

"It seemed so new and so out of the ordinary," she said.

When she realized she could experience all the emotions that come with pregnancy and childbirth, at a fraction of the cost of in-vitro fertilization, Rachelle decided to pursue it.

Over five months, the Rifes were interviewed and counseled by social workers and had a home study. They received detailed health profiles of potential embryo donors and were able to review the eye and hair color, body type, hair texture, ethnicities and even the likes and dislikes of the donor couples.

This was a nice option, Troy said, but they had other priorities.

"We wanted to make sure they were healthy," he said.

The Rifes picked a couple who had similar physical traits and were willing to communicate with them and the child over the years.

In July 2007, they traveled to the National Embryo Donation Center, a private organization in Knoxville, Tenn., for the embryo transfer.

Doctors implanted three embryos in Rachelle's womb, but the transfer didn't take.

"We were devastated," Rachelle said.

They returned to Knoxville that September for another attempt. This time they achieved success using embryos from a couple that chose to remain anonymous.

### **'Not spare parts'**

The world's first "snowflake baby," Hannah Strege was born with little fanfare in December 1998, a month after researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison created the first human embryonic stem cell line. Embryo adoption and stem cell research collided in 2006 at the White House, when President Bush vetoed a bill that would have expanded federal funding of embryonic stem cell research.

Standing behind Bush were 18 families that had adopted embryos.

"These boys and girls are not spare parts," Bush said. "They remind us of what is lost when embryos are

destroyed in the name of research."

Exact figures are unavailable, but various federal studies suggest less than 1 percent of frozen embryos are adopted; and some couples do not want other people to raise their biological children.

Rachelle admits that at first she wasn't comfortable with the idea of giving birth to someone else's baby. But as she gave it more thought, she realized she and her husband consider each other family even though they are not genetically related.

"Over time you become one family," she said.

With more than 400,000 frozen embryos in clinics and tissue banks nationwide, the federal government has been promoting embryo adoption as an option for infertile couples.

Since 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded \$10.8 million in grants to organizations, most of them faith-based, to promote awareness of embryo adoption. The government has also allocated \$216.4 million since 2002 to the study of human embryonic stem cell lines that were created before 2001, when Bush limited the number of lines.

Among the groups promoting awareness of embryo donation is RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, an advocacy group for infertile couples.

Unlike faith-based groups, RESOLVE believes couples with excess frozen embryos should be able to donate them for embryonic stem cell research.

But the organization also promotes embryo adoption, said Barbara Collura, RESOLVE executive director.

"It is one way out of many, many ways a couple could build a family," she said.

#### **'I feel very blessed'**

Three weeks before her due date, Rachelle woke up at 4 a.m. and knew the baby was coming.

Six hours later, Greyson Kent Rife was born with a lot of hair and weighed 6 pounds, 6 ounces.

"The first thing I said to him when he was born was, 'I love you, Greyson,' " Troy said. "And then I started kissing him."

Rachelle sees Greyson's birth as part of a divine plan.

"I feel very blessed I got to experience pregnancy and labor and delivery in all of its glory and to be able to breast feed now," she said.

The couple still has four other frozen embryos, genetic siblings of Greyson, which they plan to use in a year in hopes of giving him at least one brother or sister.

In the meantime, they still look at a black-and-white photo that looks like three flowers with several petals.

The picture is actually of the three embryos that were implanted in Rachelle's womb, one of which developed into Greyson.

"Isn't that crazy?" she said. "Out of that tiny little speck came this beautiful child."

*You can reach Kim Kozlowski at [kkozlowski@detnews.com](mailto:kkozlowski@detnews.com).*



October 21, 2008

## Summit deals with 20,000 dropouts a year in Michigan

### Goal: Ways to keep students in school

LORI HIGGINS

FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

LANSING -- As economist Andrew Sum pointed out the wide gap between lifetime earnings for high school dropouts and those who've received a diploma or college degree, he told the audience the numbers should be sobering.

"When you look at these results, you ought to tremble," said Sum, professor of economics and director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

But any of the statistics Sum displayed on an overhead projector during a half-hour talk at Monday's Michigan Dropout Prevention Summit in Lansing could have caused a similar reaction. Dropouts, he said, are more likely to live in poverty, earn substantially lower pay and be incarcerated.

And Michigan, he said, is harder hit by the nation's dropout crisis because of the deindustrialization of the state and the disappearance of the kinds of jobs that years ago allowed dropouts to still make good money.

"Michigan used to have among the most well-paid dropouts," Sum said.

The all-day summit was organized by a cadre of organizations to tackle the state's dropout crisis, in which more than 20,000 high school students abandon their education each year.

The summit is a culmination of about six months of work, including 11 hearings held across the state in which parents, educators, students and others discussed the crisis. The summit goal: come up with solutions that work for keeping kids in school.

Early in the day, Gov. Jennifer Granholm urged participants to become "educational revolutionaries."

"For those kids that drop out, that's a 100% failure. There is no question ... we have to be committed to changing the status quo."

She encouraged participants to be willing to "rewrite the rules for those kids," which the current system is not working for.

But Granholm said she doesn't want to see the state's tough new graduation requirements -- which some say could lead to more dropouts -- softened in response.

Participants heard from a panel of students, most of whom had dropped out of school at one point. Among them was Robert Olivarez, 16, of Lansing, who described growing up with a mother who was in and out of jail. He experimented with drugs and alcohol, dropped out of school and found himself going down the wrong path until he talked to a cousin who had enrolled in the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy, a military-type school in Battle Creek that helps kids get caught up while focusing on infusing discipline and structure in their lives.

Before he entered the program, he had a 0.2 grade point average. Now, his GPA is up to 3.7.

"They helped me get my education," Robert said.

The students were asked, in one word, what youth like them need.

Responses ranged from "respect" to "love" to being noticed.

"Support is key," Robert said.

Contact **LORI HIGGINS** at 248-351-3694 or [lhiggins@freepress.com](mailto:lhiggins@freepress.com).

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## MICHIGAN REPORT

The Capitol Record Since 1906

REPORT NO. 203, VOLUME 47-- MONDAY, OCTOBER 20 2008

### **SUMMIT HOPED TO SPUR ACTION ON DROPOUTS**

Various education, community and business groups hoped that presenting leaders with the serious outcomes of high school dropouts, and a chance to talk about various proposals, will mean new plans that will keep kids in school.

Many of the solutions discussed over the course of the Michigan Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit in Lansing on Monday have been tossed around for years. But organizers of the event pushed attendees to take those ideas most relevant to their home communities and put on the pressure to get them implemented.

"We know what works. We've just got to deploy those," said **Governor Jennifer Granholm** in opening the summit.

"We're going to be judged by history very harshly," said Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan of the inability to solve the dropout problem so far. "For every dropout, maybe that was the kid who was going to cure cancer."

And Ms. Granholm said the community has to take responsibility for the performance of students. "These are not someone else's kids. These are our kids," she said.

Mr. Flanagan said the problem will take new ideas. "We've got initiatives for 30 years and we've got basically a situation none of us should be proud of," he said.

But school officials said there are programs to look to for ideas.

"There are some good things happening in the state; there are some programs that are succeeding," said Ron Koehler, assistant superintendent for organizational and community initiatives. "There aren't enough of those programs."

Among the successes in his district is a mentoring training program, he said.

Business groups also argued the dropout problem needs to be solved to be sure the country can maintain its workforce.

"We are here because kids have decided not to participate in the system as it's currently designed," said James Sandy with the Michigan Business Leaders for Education Excellence.

Chris Cressy with State Farm Insurance Companies, the primary sponsor of the summit and expecting to sponsor similar summits across the nation over the next year, said trying to reduce the dropout rate is in the company's self interest. "We hire and look for the best and brightest," she said.

But the current high dropout rates makes those with the right skills and education harder to find and so more expensive to hire.

Ms. Granholm also said districts will have to become more flexible. "I hope everyone in the education systems agrees that the old rules haven't worked for these kids," she said of dropouts and potential dropouts. "We have to be willing to blow it up, for these kids."

But MEA officials argued that one of Ms. Granholm's solutions for blowing up the current system, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Program, will in the end do little to improve graduation rates, particularly with only \$15 million to operate.

"We're not expecting manna from heaven; we're expecting priorities from Lansing," said MEA spokesperson Doug Pratt. He said the state needs to be promoting policies that will allow districts to innovate and meet individual student needs, not a single set of standards such as those now set by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

School districts are going to have to work with local communities if for no other reason then the funds to create some of the needed programs are not going to come from Lansing, Ms. Granholm said. "We're not going to see manna from heaven in terms of dollars," she said. "Many of the strategies we're talking about require longer hours. You'll have to figure out how to do that in the district."

The key is that communities have to take some action, said Charles Hiteshew with America's Promise. "People throw up their hands and say we can't do anything about it, but the research says we can," he said. "We have to have the powers that be recognize the problem."

And he said it helps that the problem is most concentrated in the nations largest cities (the group's survey showed Detroit is the worst performing of those cities, while Michigan's overall graduation rate tops the national average).

"We have to develop and we are developing poverty reduction strategies that schools and communities are involved in and we have to move the safety net into the schools," said Ismael Ahmed, director of the Department of Human Services.

The department already has 64 family resource centers in local school buildings. "We're going to move to about 80 of them this year, but the need to do it on a grander scale is evident," he said.

Mr. Flanagan said schools also have to look at particularly the state budget as a whole, rather than looking solely at their own needs. "We fight to preserve the foundation grant at the cost of prenatal care for poor moms," he said as an example. "In effect we just screwed the system from the start."

Mr. Flanagan and Mr. Ahmed both derided the state a bit for concentrating on K-12 education and putting relatively little into early childhood programs.

"The political will necessary to get all of our kids to a place where they're ready to learn has a long way to go," Mr. Ahmed said. "If you (communities) want early education then you have to organize yourselves to make that happen."

State agencies and school districts also have to be sure students and parents know what programs are available to help them, said Karen Pittman, executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment. "We actually have the potential to know young people and their families by name. ...We also have the capacity to know what's inside the programs we have," she said. "It shouldn't be that hard for young people and their families to know what's being offered."

The dropout/poverty problem also appears to be a bit of a cycle. Various officials noted that struggles with academic achievement and propensity to drop out were tied to poverty. But Andrew Sun, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies in Boston, said those who drop out are also more likely to be impoverished. And he said that problem was even greater in Michigan than in the rest of the nation.

The employment rate for dropouts in Michigan is 13 percent less than the national average, Mr. Sun said. And he said those dropouts in Michigan earn an average \$12,926 a year, compared to \$32,106 for all workers in the state. Having a high school diploma increases that wage to \$21,779 and a bachelor's degree pushes it to \$48,233, he said.

He noted prospects for male dropouts have also been dropping in Michigan over the last 30 years. In 1979 a high school dropout could expect to earn an average \$1.55 million over a lifetime. In 2006, that expected lifetime earning dropped to \$817,896. Those with a high school diploma, in comparison, expected \$2.1 million lifetime in 1979 and \$1.26 million in 2006.

He said other lifetime earning expectations for men have dropped, but they dropped less for those with more education.

Women, except for dropouts, have seen earnings expectations rise, but he said that was largely a function of more women in the workplace and with more education.

Dropouts, in addition to seeing less income themselves, also cost their communities, Mr. Sun said. While a high school graduate would be expected to have a net contribution to taxes of \$4,201 a year in 2004-05, dropouts were a net drain on the system of \$3,269 each.

"We ought to be able to achieve high (graduation) rates in all districts," Mr. Sun said.

Ms. Granholm argued what should not happen to increase the graduation rate is to reduce the high school graduation requirements. "Some people have complained that we raised the standards," she said. "That's not contributing to the dropout rate. What's contributing to the dropout rate is us not being creative enough to get them over the high bar. ...We have to think differently about what (school) staff members can do."

Communities also need to come into the schools to help students achieve, Mr. Ahmed said. "We need hundreds of thousands of mentors," he said. "Government can only do so much in getting us there."

The state also needs to reach those who are already past school age, said Andy Levin, deputy director of the Department of Labor and Economic Growth. "Fully one-third of the adults in Michigan, whether they're unemployed or underemployed, they're not ready to do post-secondary education," he said.

The department is trying to restructure adult education to have those programs work more seamlessly with community college programs, he said.

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## **Scholarships support program for foster-care youth**

Jan. 18, 2008

KALAMAZOO--The members of one of the nation's most underserved college-age populations will get help making their higher education dreams come true, thanks to a new scholarship and support initiative being launched at Western Michigan University this fall.

WMU's Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative is an effort being launched in coordination with the Michigan Campus Compact and the Michigan Department of Human Services. The pilot program is designed to recruit and offer a support structure and financial aid for young people who have aged out of foster care and who qualify for admission or transfer to WMU. While the intent is to target Michigan's foster care youth, the program is open to qualified students from any state.

The initiative will create a community of scholars among WMU students who grew up in foster care and will attempt to fill the unique support needs that exist for the students who have no adult mentors and no permanent home outside their college residence and who have specialized legal, medical, counseling and financial needs. The goal will be to help foster youth, who age out of care between the ages of 18 and 20, make the transition to adulthood through higher education.

"We cannot, as a society, afford to lose the potential these young people represent," says WMU President John M. Dunn. "At Western Michigan University, we are passionate about insuring that no segment of our society is kept from having access to higher education. This University, with its broad range of programs, excellent faculty and strong support systems is well positioned to make success for these young people a reality."

Michigan Department of Human Services Director Ismael Ahmed applauds WMU's commitment to foster youths.

"Programs like this one are essential to improve outcomes," he said. "The University's leadership is the model for other institutions to provide the support and resources foster youths need to lead productive lives."

Chief among the tools WMU will use to support foster youth is the John Seita Scholarship, named for a three-time WMU alumnus who grew up in foster care and has become one of the nation's foremost experts on and advocates for foster youth. Seita, who has published extensively on the topics of foster care and youth development and whose background includes work with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is being honored this month with the 2007 Ruth Massing Foster Care Alumni Award through Casey Family programs--an offshoot of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Only one foster care alumni a year is selected in the United States.



The Seita Scholarship will provide foster youth aging out of care with undergraduate tuition. Recipients will be required to live on campus, and year-round, on-campus housing will be available, thus providing students with the stability of knowing they have a roof over their heads even during semester breaks.

Seita, now an associate professor of social work at Michigan State University, says people unfamiliar with the plight of former foster youth, often underestimate the importance of housing stability for a student trying to pursue a college degree. Before he became a student at WMU, Seita briefly attended a small Michigan liberal arts college. When his fellow students went home for the holidays, he had no place to go. When college administrators could offer him no assistance, he spent his holiday recess sneaking in and out of a residence hall and scrambling to find a way to eat.

Other tools in WMU's foster care initiative will include:

- adult assistance to young people who need help and encouragement with admissions and financial aid forms;
- a partnership with Kalamazoo Valley Community College to facilitate the transfer of foster youth to WMU;
- a work study component to provide additional life skills and campus connections for students in the program; and
- a marketing drive with state agencies that will publicize the initiative to Michigan middle schools, high schools, foster care agencies and foster parent associations.

In addition, a support network on the campus and in the Kalamazoo community will be constructed and include professionals in the areas of career planning, mentoring, tutoring, counseling and legal services. Support services may also include providing the students with an opportunity to catch up on such life skills as banking, budgeting and time management.

Annually, more than 500 young people age out of Michigan's foster care system. Nationally, the figure is about 20,000. While 70 percent aspire to go to college, only about 20 percent actually enroll and only a quarter of those students go on to earn a degree. That compares to a national college attendance figure for college-age youth of about 67 percent.

In addition to their financial and housing problems, a number of other issues come into play with former foster students. Foster care youth, for instance, frequently lack adult encouragement and role models and often are unfamiliar with college and career options.

"There is a whole set of characteristics and a comfort level that most children acquire through what I call 'family privilege,'" Seita says. "It's something children in traditional families never even think about, but foster kids just never have the opportunity to acquire those traits."

The Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative is an outgrowth of a statewide summit in April 2007 in which WMU joined with representatives from colleges and state agencies to begin assessing the situation and begin post-secondary planning for Michigan's foster care

population. Planning for the WMU program accelerated in the fall of 2007 with the support of WMU's new president, Dunn. A student advisory group made up of current WMU students who formerly lived in foster care is assisting with the planning effort.

First-time freshmen or transfer students who were in foster care or were wards of the state at the time of their high school graduation are eligible to apply for WMU's John Seita Scholarship. Recipients must meet WMU's admission requirements, complete the University's admissions process, fill out a federal financial aid form each year, live on campus and agree to a basic set of conditions that will include maintaining a minimum GPA and taking part in academic support programs such as First Year Experience.

Additional information on how the program will work is available by contacting one of WMU's three principal planners: Penny Bundy, director of admissions, at (269) 387-2000; Mark Delorey, director of financial aid and scholarships, at (269) 387-6037; or Dr. Yvonne Unrau, associate professor of social work, at (269) 387-3185. John Seita, for whom the scholarship is named, can be reached at (269) 501-5487.

**Media contact:** Cheryl Roland, (269) 387-8400,  
[cheryl.roland@wmich.edu](mailto:cheryl.roland@wmich.edu)

WMU News  
Office of University Relations  
Western Michigan University  
1903 W Michigan Ave  
Kalamazoo MI 49008-5433 USA  
(269) 387-8400  
[www.wmich.edu/wmu/news](http://www.wmich.edu/wmu/news)



## **More May Ask for Help Paying Utilities Bills**

**Monday, October 20, 2008 11:52 AM**

**Omaha World-Herald**

**By Nancy Gaarder, Omaha World-Herald, Neb.**

[http://www.istockanalyst.com/article/viewiStockNews+articleid\\_2721028.html](http://www.istockanalyst.com/article/viewiStockNews+articleid_2721028.html)

Oct. 20--Jamie Moore is seeing a disturbing trend.

With winter not even here, and the year not yet over, calls for help with utility bills are running almost 40 percent ahead of last year at the United Way of the Midlands.

Not only are more people seeking help, but the size of bills is significantly larger for some of those in need, she said.

The average household seeking help from the United Way in 2008 owed \$670 on its utility bill, compared with about \$495 last year, said Moore, vice president of volunteer and community services.

"Some years the numbers haven't been quite this high; other years they have," said Moore, who has been with the United Way 20 years. "People are just living closer to the line."

Paula Hite-Garcia, program director for material assistance with the Salvation Army, is worried about what her staff will see this winter when heating bills send people to her seeking help.

"I think it's going to be through the roof," she said. The Salvation Army administers the heat aid fund for Metropolitan Utilities District. "With the economy as bad as it is, there is no way people have been paying their bills like they would if they had the money."

The weather is going to play a crucial role, said Dena Howard, chief programs officer for emergency services at the Heartland Chapter of the American Red Cross.

A mild fall and winter would blunt some of the effect of heating bills on family budgets.

Jerry McKim, chief of the Iowa Bureau of Energy Assistance, said he expects a significant number of Iowa households to head into winter with their utilities disconnected. The economic downturn and overall high energy costs are conspiring against consumers, McKim said.

"Energy . . . basically has become unaffordable for far too many households in Nebraska and Iowa," he said. "Even if prices stabilize at last year's level, last year wasn't affordable."

The Metropolitan Utilities District has disconnected about 28 percent more customers this year than last, according to Mari Matulka, spokeswoman. This year, about 14,500 customers have been disconnected. Many were reconnected within days of having their service turned off, she said.

Going into winter, she said, significantly fewer MUD customers -- 31 percent -- are at risk of disconnection than a year ago, she said, and the size of delinquent bills is smaller.

"We are in a relatively good position at this point," she said.

A good piece of news has been that this summer was cooler than normal, so electric bills weren't extraordinarily high.

The Omaha Public Power District is on a pace to see slightly fewer disconnections this year than two years ago, according to spokesman Jeff Hanson. Also, OPPD customers who have fallen behind are doing so by noticeably smaller amounts -- about 24 percent less than two years ago as of the end of August, he said.

MidAmerican Energy also saw a drop in disconnections in 2008 compared with 2007 in Iowa, according to spokeswoman Ann Thelen.

In dozens of states, disconnections are up, according to a survey by the Associated Press. Shutoffs are running 17 percent higher among New York's major utilities, and 22 percent in Michigan.

Those who work with energy assistance advise people to contact their utility or aid agency for help sooner rather than later.

And there is some help on the way. Federal energy assistance to states this winter will reach record levels. Nebraska expects to receive almost \$40 million and Iowa about \$67.8 million.



## 'It is a crisis': Homelessness on the rise in Jackson

**Posted by Chris Gautz | Jackson Citizen Patriot October 21, 2008 11:30AM**

An unexpected injury that led to soaring health care bills. A foreclosure that forced a landlord to evict a tenant. A drug or alcohol problem that got out of control.

There are many factors that can push a person into homelessness, and as the local economy continues to worsen, area nonprofits say there is a growing need for emergency shelter.

"It is a crisis and it's steadily growing," said Billie Oliver, executive director of the Grace Haven Homeless Shelter. "I don't know what we're going to do if it gets any worse than it already is."

At Grace Haven, with locations on Francis and Williams streets, Oliver said the shelter is routinely at capacity.

"Mostly, it's mothers with children," she said.

She said many residents were working two or three minimum-wage jobs, but lost their apartment because they couldn't afford to pay both the rent and the utility bills. Oliver said parents faced with that choice routinely choose the utility bill, because if they don't they are at risk of having their children taken away.

At the Interfaith Shelter, 414 S. Blackstone St., workers are seeing an increase in the number seeking shelter and meals.

Through September, the shelter has served 5,000 more meals than it did at this point last year, up from 55,697 to 60,811.

The number of people lodged at the Interfaith also increased by more than 3,000 through September, increasing from 9,212 to 12,498. It is likely the shelter will easily surpass 2007's total number of lodgings, which were 13,267.

Shelter manager Kitrina Sims said Monday was an average day, with 26 women and children and 20 men lodged at Interfaith, putting it at about half its capacity.

Last month it averaged 54 residents per night, the highest average since August 2003.

That was due to several large families coming to the shelter, she said.

The nine rooms designated for women and children have two to three bunk beds each, and can house 45, but the large families pushed it past capacity to 60. Thirty were children.

"That was a lot of kids," Sims said. "By the grace of God they were able to find housing."

Sims said it's difficult to plan for a spike because homelessness isn't seasonal.

She said some who sleep on the streets have told her they are likely to come to the shelter once it gets really cold, but that's a small percentage.

"Mostly it's just people in need," she said.

People can stay at the shelter for up to 90 days and the average is about 60, Sims said.

"If that person is looking for work, they are usually here a lot longer," Sims said.

Finding work in this economy is tough enough, but finding a job that pays enough to cover the cost of rent, utilities and food is even tougher.

Jackie Glaspie of Jackson has lived at the shelter since Aug. 11 after coming from a treatment center for dependence on alcohol and drugs.

"I'm trying to find housing and a job," she said.

She now works two days a week at the shelter, assisting people who arrive, showing them to their rooms and giving them their bedding.

Glaspie, who has been clean for almost six months, said she thanks the staff and the atmosphere at the shelter.

"It's a tender, loving and caring family here," she said.

She said she would like to find a job that allows her to give back to the community, like working with children, or in a church or shelter

"I'm focused all on positives now; the negatives are out of my life," she said. "I really have grown here."

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**Michigan Department of Human Services News Release**

**Contact: Edward Woods III, director of communications, (517) 373-7394 or (517) 927-1884**

**Michigan Department of Human Services and Capital Area  
Community Services, Inc., host Lansing Weatherization Day  
event**

**Oct. 21, 2008**

Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has proclaimed Oct. 30 as Weatherization Day in Michigan. On Tuesday, representatives of the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) and Capital Area Community Services, Inc. hosted a Weatherization Day event in Lansing, including tours of a weatherization demonstration house.

DHS Chief Deputy Director Stanley Stewart told those attending, "We, at the Department of Human Services, are committed to promoting energy conservation, pollution reduction and safer homes through continuing implementation of our weatherization initiatives."

The Michigan Weatherization Program has weatherized more than 268,000 low-income homes since the program began in 1977. Funding is provided by the U.S. Department of Energy's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and a Michigan Public Service Commission Low Income Energy Efficiency Award.

The program's goal is to reduce energy usage and lower utility bills. Services provided include attic, wall and foundation insulation; air leakage reduction; furnace repair or replacement; refrigerator replacement; and client energy education.

For more information about the Weatherization Program, including how to apply for these services, please visit [www.michigan.gov/dhs](http://www.michigan.gov/dhs).

## **Michigan Department of Human Services Media Advisory**

**Contact: Edward Woods III, communications director, (517) 373-7394**

### **Two community partner roundtables to be held in Oakland County; focus on reducing poverty and maximizing economic opportunities for all**

Two community partner roundtables will be held Tuesday, Oct. 21, to showcase local efforts to reduce poverty and maximize economic opportunity. Department of Human Services Director Ismael Ahmed will join regional partner leaders and community residents to talk about how Michigan families and individuals are finding creative solutions to these challenging economic times.

Poverty continues to impact hard-working Michigan families. The Michigan Department of Human Services, with the assistance of regional partners, is working aggressively to reduce poverty and to maximize economic opportunities for all.

#### **The first roundtable will be held:**

Tuesday, Oct. 21

1 to 2 p.m.

Lighthouse Community Development

2nd Floor Classroom

46156 Woodward Ave.

Pontiac, Mich.

Speakers include:

- Ismael Ahmed, director, Michigan Department of Human Services.
- Billy R. Holland, district manager, Oakland County Michigan Department of Human Services.
- Clarence E. Phillips, mayor, city of Pontiac.
- Ronald B. Borngesser, CEO, Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency.
- John Ziraldo, CEO and president, Lighthouse of Oakland County.
- Special guests.

#### **The second roundtable will be held:**

Tuesday, Oct. 21

3:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Volunteers of America

21415 Civic Center Drive, Suite 210

Southfield, Mich.

Speakers include:

- Ismael Ahmed, director, Michigan Department of Human Services.
- Velvet Savage, district manager, Oakland County Michigan Department of Human Services
- Brenda Lawrence, mayor, City of Southfield.
- Sue Hachem, senior refugee specialist, Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.
- Monica Luoma, director of communications, Forgotten Harvest.
- Special guests.

For more information, please visit the DHS Web site at [www.michigan.gov/dhs](http://www.michigan.gov/dhs) or [www.michigan.gov/poverty](http://www.michigan.gov/poverty)